

# TRINITY SUNDAY

by

HAROLD RILEY



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5, 15th St. N.W.  
WASHINGTON, D.C.



# TRINITY SUNDAY

## *The Doctrine of the Blessed Trinity*

**T**HE doctrine of the blessed Trinity is the most profound of the mysteries of the Christian religion, and the most illuminating. It is the most profound because it deals with the ultimate truth to which the human mind can reach ; the most illuminating because it sheds light on every other aspect of the Christian faith, on the nature of creation and of man, and on his final destiny. It states that there is one God, and one alone, and that in this one God there are three Persons, of the same essence and nature, so that God is not only the ground of the unity, but also of the diversity, that we discern in all things. It takes us back to God as the source of the one being, one law and one purpose that are to be found in all creation ; and also to him as the source of that social character that is to be seen in the living creation, in man himself, and in the Church that God has founded.

## *The Unity of God*

The first great truth on which the doctrine of the holy Trinity insists is that of the Unity of God. It is not a truth that the Christian Church alone has accepted ; it is the basic truth of the Jewish religion, to which the Old Testament already bore witness. "Thou shalt have none other gods but me" ; "the Lord thy God is one Lord" ; "the Lord, he is God, there is none else beside him" ; these and similar quotations give the authentic message of the old dispensation, in a world that was generally concerned to worship "gods many and lords many." The Christian Church arose out of the old Israel, and inherited, among other things, a passionate loyalty to the conception of the one God, man's Creator and Judge, and the source of all being. The doctrine of the Christian Church is not a modification of the doctrine that there is one God, but is firmly based upon it, and is a statement of further



truths revealed by the one God about himself. Christianity has been given, that is to say, a deeper insight into the character of God, but it has not wavered in any way from its allegiance to the truth of God's Unity.

### *The Three Persons*

In the one Godhead there are three Persons. Naturally in speaking of God we are bound to use language that has severe limitations, and the word "Person," like other words, might be open to misunderstanding. In the first centuries of its history, the Church was feeling after a vocabulary in which to state its faith, and there was hesitation as to what were the most adequate words to use. In speaking of three "Persons" the Church is not, on the one hand, claiming that there are three Beings in God; for God is one Being; on the other hand, it is not merely speaking of three "modes" or ways in which God has revealed himself to man, but of distinctions in the eternal Being of God, which have been revealed to us.

The three Persons of the Holy Trinity are God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. The revelation of the doctrine of God's threefold Being came through the Incarnation, by which God the Son took to himself our human nature and came to earth as Man. In his Manhood we call him Jesus Christ. By what he was, and by his words he revealed to man truths about God that could not otherwise be known. He spoke of his divine Father in heaven; he showed that he himself could only be accounted for as having divine attributes; and he promised the Holy Spirit, who also could only be spoken of as having the nature of God. All that the Church subsequently did in its formulations of doctrine about the Being of God was to mould a language and use it to say that in the one God there are to be discerned three personal centres of activity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, of one divine essence, but differing in their relationship to each other.



*The Worship of the Holy Trinity*

The whole worship of the Church is worship of the Holy Trinity. It is for this reason that so long a time passed before a special feast in honour of the tri-une God was instituted. When the custom arose in certain places of observing the first Sunday after Pentecost in this way, and of using the Office of the Holy Trinity composed by Bishop Stephen of Liege (903-920) on this day, or of observing the Sunday before Advent for the same purpose, Pope Alexander II (1061-1073) refused to extend the observance of the feast, on the ground that the daily worship of the Church itself in honour of the Holy Trinity, as the daily use of the *Gloria Patri* as a constant refrain through the Church services made clear. At last John XXII (1316-1334) ordered the observance of the feast on the Sunday after Pentecost, which has ever since been set aside for this purpose throughout Western Christendom.

*The Services of Trinity Sunday*

Through the services of Trinity Sunday the recurring themes are those of the greatness and holiness of God, of the mystery of his Being, and of his one nature in three Persons.

At the Mass, the note of the whole feast is struck by the words of the *Introit*. The Psalm-verse of this is from the beginning of the eighth Psalm: "O Lord our Governor, how excellent is thy Name in all the world," and the antiphon accompanying this verse begins "Blessed be the holy Trinity and the undivided Unity." This is the burden of the Church's praise at all times, and is naturally most explicit on this feast.

In the *Collect* we pray that as God has given us grace, through confessing the true faith that he has revealed, both to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and also to worship him in his Unity, so we may be kept steadfast in the same faith and defended from all adversities. The Collects are meant to be short general prayers for the universal needs of the Church, and it is most appropriate that



of the gifts that we pray for, faith is the one that on this day we specially ask.

In place of an Epistle, on this day as on some other days, a *Lesson* from another book of the Bible is read. On Trinity Sunday it is from the Revelation of St John (*iv.1ff.*), and speaks of the worship given to God in heaven. In the author's vision, a throne is set in heaven, "and one sat on the throne"—God, to describe whom human words are so inadequate. About the throne of God were the four and twenty elders who represent the perfection of the Church of God, and the four living creatures that are the symbols of God's visible creation. From the four living creatures, each with six wings, like the seraphs in Isaiah's vision (*Isa. vi.1-8*) goes up the ceaseless cry that the prophet heard, "Holy, holy, holy." The author of the Revelation uses numbers to symbolize the truths of the Faith and the number three to symbolize the Godhead. So the song of the living creatures is one of three lines, and each line has three members,

"Holy, holy, holy,

Lord God Almighty,

Which was, and is, and is to come."

This is the song of creation, the song of all created things that we could hear if we would attend. This is the voice that St Augustine speaks of in his Confessions (Bk. x), "And I replied unto all the things which encompass the door of my flesh, 'Ye have told me of my God, that ye are not he; tell me something of him.' And they cried out with a loud voice, 'He made us.' My questioning them, was my thoughts on them, and their form of beauty gave the answer."

To this song of creation is added, through the four and twenty elders, the song of the Church:

"Thou art worthy, O Lord,

to receive glory, and honour, and power,

for thou hast created all things,

and for thy pleasure they are,

and were created."



The praise of creation is an unconscious act ; that of the Church is the conscious praise of the sons of God. It is to our part in this that we are called in the worship of the Church.

In the *Gospel* we have the story of Nicodemus (John *iii.1ff*), which speaks of the Father (*e.g.*, in the phrases “come from God” ; “the kingdom of God”), of the Son (“he that came down from heaven”), and of the Holy Ghost (“the Spirit”) ; and are given the warning that our faith concerning earthly things leads us to a faith about heavenly things. Among these heavenly things our faith in the Holy Trinity is central.

Trinity Sunday has a *proper Preface*, that is a special section in the chant that precedes the *Sanctus*. In it we praise God who is “not one only Person, but three Persons in one Substance,” believing the same of the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, “without any difference or inequality.” To-day also the *Sanctus* has a special significance, for it puts on our own lips the song that Isaiah heard in his vision of the worship of God in heaven, and that the Lesson from Revelation has again brought to our notice.

Another special feature of Trinity Sunday is the recitation of the Creed of St. Athanasius in the Office of Mattins, as in former days in the Office of Prime. The Athanasian Creed (which is also called in the Prayer Book the *Quicunque Vult*, from the first two words of the Latin text) was not actually written by the Saint whose name it bears, though it enshrines the truths in witness to which he spent his life. In form it is a hymn rather than a creed, for as it says “the Catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity,” and our faith is not only to be proclaimed before men, but also confessed to God himself. The Athanasian Creed does indeed formulate our faith, and that with masterly precision and clarity. It is the most detailed of the Creeds in its exposition of the doctrines both



of the Trinity and of the Incarnation, and it is with special appropriateness that we recite it on this day.

*Devotion to the Holy Trinity*

Like other feasts of the year, Trinity Sunday is not meant to exhaust the particular kind of devotion to which it is consecrated, but to remind us of characteristics that ought to be found in our prayer all through the year. Daily when we recite the *Gloria Patri*, or when we add to collects the longer ending ("through Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end") we have reason to call to mind those deep theological truths about God which are of such immense significance. Our life of prayer is impoverished unless it has within it the realization of the Father of all, of the Son through whom we approach him and whose members we are, and of the Holy Spirit who prays within us. Moreover the insistence on the holiness and mystery of the Godhead, which we associate with this feast, is something to affect the approach we make to God at all times, deepening our reverence and wonder, and inspiring us with love and humility.

It is fitting that at the end of the first half of the Church year, when we have considered in turn at the great events of the earthly life of our Lord, we should ponder again on the character of the God who has been revealed to us through that life. It is equally fitting that before the rest of the Church year begins, with its lessons drawn from our Lord's teaching and mighty works, we should have before our minds the thought of the great God from whom we came and to whom we go, for whose sake we are to "follow the example of our Saviour Christ and be made like unto him." It is for these reasons that we keep the feast of the holy Trinity at this time.

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*